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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

INFORMATION REPORT

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COUNTRY Poland

SUBJECT Impressions Among the 'New Aristocracy' in Warsaw

PLACE ACQUIRED
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DATE ACQUIRED
(BY SOURCE)

DATE (OF INFO.) Dec 53 - Feb 54

DATE DISTR. 19 Apr 1954

DAS NO.	
OCI NO.	

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Clothing

2. "The most prosperous people in Warsaw are quite decently dressed on the whole. But there is less elegance than before World War II, and the fur coats and ladies' hats are less expensive. Just as they did during the German occupation, the ladies are making every effort to defy bad times and dress as well as possible. Their shoes are particularly smart. The famous Warsaw shoemakers to this day produce excellent, handmade ladies' shoes. Of course, such shoes are very expensive: the cheapest cost about 300 zl. a pair; others cost up to 800 zl. a pair, or as much as the monthly wages of a good specialist. These handmade shoes are of every kind and variety, including ball slippers of gold or silver leather. Such evening slippers are reserved, however, for the wives of the biggest bosses: departmental directors in ministries and higher, also UB bosses. The patronage of the UB wives offers excellent protection to these 'private enterprisers', of whom there are still about 50 or 60 in Warsaw. Handmade shoes for men cost 600-800 zl.; the higher price is for shoes of chamol leather.
3. "Generally speaking, men are dressed less elegantly than women. One notices immediately in the streets that no man ever wears a hat. Cloth caps are worn instead.
4. "It is very difficult to find a decent ready-made man's suit; as a rule all are of very bad quality. All the decent suits one sees are ordered from tailors and made of good quality Polish suiting. This material is still produced in very small quantities, to satisfy the needs of the new upper class. It is very

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expensive indeed, between 1,000-1,600 zl. for a suit. I even heard of suiting costing 2000 zl. per 'coupon'. These textiles are never sold per meter, only per 'coupon' (kupon ubranlowy) which is the quantity needed for a suit. These 'coupons' are mostly sold 'half-legally', i.e., the high official who is entitled to do so buys the coupon legally and resells it for the above prices. Not only Polish textiles are sold on this half-legal black market. Hitherto a considerable proportion of the textiles sold 'under hand' (pod reka) have come from gift parcels sent from abroad. The tailoring shops in the great universal department stores and the state and cooperative tailoring shops (spoldzielnie krawieckie) make suits from this good suiting. More often the customer goes to a small private tailor. One reason is that there he is less conspicuous, particularly to the taxation authorities. These small private tailors work mostly for the same customers as the private shoemakers, i.e., high government and Party functionaries and UB bosses.

Children

5. "I was very impressed by the children of the new upper class. They are fit physically and excellently dressed. In the Old Town of Warsaw (Stare Miasto) as well as in Mariensztat I saw many children wearing fur coats of white or grey rabbit. This was characteristic in Poland before World War II. Of course, the explanation is simple. Since the rehabilitation, the Old Town has become a privileged quarter; almost all the inhabitants are Stakhanovites at the very least. The same is true of Mariensztat, where the children are also well-dressed and well-nourished. In these quarters even the adults are well-fed and well-dressed. The contrast with other quarters of Warsaw is striking.
6. "The famous universal shop Bracia Jablowsky has been turned into a Dom Dziecka where one can buy everything children need: clothes, footwear, sporting gear, toys and tinned children's food.

Opera

7. "The reconstruction of the Warsaw Opera House, destroyed during World War II, is almost finished. Meanwhile opera performances continue to take place in the former Kino Roma cinema on Ulica Nowogrodzka. Some years ago it was decided to make use of this cinema hall because it is large and has an excellent deep stage and a large organ. Over the years much money has been spent on furnishing this hall, though it is only a temporary arrangement. Armchairs and stalls are of red leather. It is always warm there, +22° centigrade. The stage seems well equipped; the scenes are well painted; and the performances show technical excellence. The stalls and the four first rows in the orchestra cost about 30zl. This is expensive, but they are always sold out - the new upper class fills them to such an extent that one has to order tickets a week in advance.
8. "However, it cannot be said that it is only the new upper class that goes to the opera. Other people, who sit on cheaper seats, go there to listen to the classical repertory which is still almost free from political propaganda. Only in a couple of sentences during the performance and in the epilogue is one reminded that in a people's democracy, on the Soviet pattern, everything has to serve propaganda purposes. Apart from this, the performances are very satisfactory.
9. "The contrast in the clothes of opera and theater-goers is less than before World War II. This does not mean that Poland now has a more classless society. It is merely not deemed suitable to show one's finery in public places.
10. "I saw a ballet and also the pantomime 'Coppelia', which was actually very good, despite all the propaganda that had been introduced into it.

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Hotels

11. "Before World War II Bristol was the most elegant and best hotel of Warsaw. It has retained its place to this day. It has been completely rehabilitated and its interior has been thoroughly altered. The former Dom Kwaterunko Wojskowego, covered with sandstone, was not damaged during the war. It has also been thoroughly overhauled and looks very elegant. On the other side of the street is the large Hotel Euro, Piski. This is also a first-class hotel but not as elegant as Bristol.

Public Transport

12. "Public means of transport in Warsaw, the buses and streetcars are full to overflowing. Instead of the comfortable streetcars of pre World War II, the present streetcars resemble the light Soviet streetcars with many standing places.
13. "If one is rich enough to hire a cab, one is more comfortable than before the war. (Many buy comparatively more comfort in the present Socialist 'classless' society than before World War II). The taxicabs are larger than before the war. They are almost exclusively of the Pobeda type, like large American cars. People call these cars '1/2-bieda' or 'half-poverty'. These taxis are probably less suitable to the needs of the population than those before World War II; the taxis then were of different sizes, the smaller ones being cheaper and also quicker in traffic. The present-day authorities consider that it looks better when there are fewer but more elegant taxis. They feel this is more important than to suit the taxis to the paying capacity of the population. (This is not my comment but that of my hostess in Warsaw who has lived in Warsaw all her life.)

Gifts

14. "In recent years presents for Christmas and other occasions have become more and more practical in Poland. Apart from the practical presents, people also give cheap, but artistically beautiful presents, mainly of the so-called Zdobnictwo ludowe or products of national handicrafts. These presents are made from clay, wood, and colored paper. The paper products depict fine flowers, plants or animals cut in silhouette. Such presents are exchanged at birthdays, name days and during the Christmas season.

Food

15. "Contrary to the custom before World War II, the shops, particularly the foodshops, in present-day Poland are often decorated with living flowers. It is said that this is a Soviet influence which is absolutely welcome. The shops in Warsaw are quite clean and make a good impression. Service depends on the shop: in the center of the town it is quite satisfactory; in the suburbs there are often enormous queues. I saw such queues waiting patiently in front of the shops when I drove in a car through the suburbs of Grochow, Brudno, Czyste, and Mokotow. The shops there looked very dirty and the goods on sale seemed much poorer than in the center of the town.
16. "Prices of foodstuffs are almost the same all over Warsaw. At present tea costs 50 zl. per kilogram, coffee 300 zl. per kg. Oranges have become much cheaper of late: They cost only 40-60 zl. per kg instead of 30 zl. apiece. Cielwa, a Turkish sweetmeat made from almonds, nuts, honey etc., is good and in very great demand, particularly among young people. It is comparatively cheap, costing only 27 zl. per kg. Chocolate, particularly Wedels (famous before World War II all over Poland, as well as in Paris and even in Stockholm after the war) is in very great demand. However, it is of poor quality. It is said that the better varieties are 'exported' directly to Moscow; the Soviet civil servants and officers buy the remainder and send it to the USSR in considerable quantities. Ordinary Poles cannot afford to buy chocolate. During a few short periods before Christmas Bakalie (made of nuts, dates, figs, raisins, and dried fruit) was in quite good supply. However, it vanished quickly from the shops and the next shipments had not arrived as of late February. It was said that the best shops in the center of Warsaw still had some, reserved for 'select' customers.

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17. "Various kinds of sardines packed in oil are in comparatively good supply. Sausage is in quite sufficient supply. The regime seems to be making great efforts on sausages which were always very popular in Poland. The so-called sucha kielbasa (dried sausage) is in great demand, also jalowcowa kielbasa and krakowska. These are the three best kinds of sausage available. However, in all shops on certain days certain kinds of sausage will be lacking. This is also true of the different kinds of butter (stolowe, solowe, do potraw, etc).

18. "Since 9 February 1954 extremely high duties have been charged on gift parcels from abroad. Rumors that circulated in advance were widespread - people went so far as to write and telephone relatives abroad, demanding that they speed up their parcels. The rumors were mainly two:

- a. The first said that the Americans had approached the Polish government either officially or semi-officially and asked to be allowed to send foodstuffs to the Poles through Polish-American organizations, this on account of the difficult food situation in Poland. Eventually the food was to come from the US government reserve. This proposal was rejected immediately, and high duty on all gift parcels introduced at once.
- b. Another explanation, far more probable, was that the need for dollars and other foreign currency of the regime was so great that the authorities changed the parcel procedure.

Instead of allowing the gift parcels to arrive one by one, without any profit to the state, it is planned to compel all relatives and friends abroad to go to PKO (Polska Kasa Oszczednosci) in the UK or Paris, nominally two independent banks but actually branches of the Polish Postal Savings Bank, to submit checks there for transmittal to Poland. There the donees are entitled to receive certain goods in great demand for these checks, e.g., food parcels of excellent quality, coal (which costs 335 kronas per ton in Poland.) for home use, good suiting, etc. Even bicycles, motorcycles and agricultural machinery may be obtained in this manner; in the country one is offered cows and sheep. Thus the regime will attain two ends: it wants to prove that all rumors about a bad food situation in Poland are wrong; it requires foreign currency which is urgently needed. It should be noted that the prices demanded are about 30 per cent higher than the current market prices, and nobody in Poland is capable of paying them. The Poles are writing to acquaintances abroad and begging their help in the form of such checks. Unfortunately they overestimate considerably the wealth of the refugees. Clearly help in this form will drop considerably.

19. "All secondhand articles are to date free of duty. Thus old clothes etc. can be sent duty-free, although it is not certain that the regime will allow this to continue.

Final Impressions

20. "My final impression of Warsaw was that although the regime does everything in its power to make the everyday life in the capital 'happier and merrier', according to the Communist propaganda, the inhabitants of Warsaw smile considerably less than before World War II and rarely laugh. They walk very quietly on their 'road towards socialism'. On the other hand, the people looked healthier than I had expected. They were not very pale. This might have been due to the temperature: -8-10° centigrade below zero."

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